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Reflecting upon reflection: beyond reflective cycles for study at Doctoral level

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The poster presents a case study on the way students on the newly accredited Professional Doctorate (DProf) programme at the University of Chester are engaged in a deeper, more critical approach to reflective learning. The programme, which draws upon over a decade of experience with the use of reflective models, examines the issue of progression in respect of reflective learning and contains a critique of existing models, where ‘reflection’ is regarded as rational and hence unproblematic.

Context: work based learning and reflective practice at Chester

The University of Chester has been engaged in work based learning (WBL) since 1998. Its main activity in this respect is the use of a ‘shell’ framework, the Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) programme to deliver flexible learning to adults in employment. There are many theoretical foundations for the underpinning philosophy embedded in WBIS but perhaps the best summary of its principles in contained in Brookfield (1998). The framework has currently has just over a thousand learners at levels 4-7, mostly studying individually negotiated pathways and award titles. In common with many other UK HE institutions Chester uses a modular framework; single modules are 20 credit rated (10 CITS).

WBIS is designed to enable the learner to design their own programme relevant to their working needs and ensure learning is integrated with practice. Students can study modules based around traditional subject disciplines; devise their own modules where there is a need to transcend traditional subject boundaries or where sufficient demand exists tutors develop new modules in response. WBIS modules can be added almost infinitely and there is an internal accreditation process for this purpose to enable rapid development.

As far as is practicable within the framework of the University regulations (and their own best interests) students begin their studies when they like, submit when ready and determine their completion date. All learning is tailored to their needs and as a result virtually no WBIS pathway is the same as another; this only usually happens

when an employer negotiates a pathway on behalf of employees. The one element all WBIS students undertake is, at the beginning of their studies, Self Review and Negotiation of Learning. In this module, irrespective of level of learning, students identify their learning achievements to date and review their learning requirements as the basis for identifying their learning pathway. At this stage they also identify opportunities for Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) whether Certificated (APCL) or Experiential (APEL). They also complete a formal exercise in reflection, typically using a recognised reflective model, such as Gibbs (1998) or Boud et al (1985).

Self Review is a single 20 credit module which performs a number of functions. First, it encourages the development of personal responsibility for learning based upon self diagnosed need. Second it sensitises individuals to an explicit view of the learning process and encourages self analysis of learning preferences. Third, it enables individuals to identify learning achievements which can be translated into academic credit. Fourth it facilitates the creation of a practical programme of study and exit award based upon that analysis. Finally it inculcates the notion of reflective practice as the basis not just for the WBIS programme of learning but as the basis of continuing and extended lifelong learning. Within Self Review students complete a formal reflective learning exercise, often based upon critical incident analysis. Thereafter all assignments produced as part of a WBIS programme of study are reflective, with strong emphasis on the application of knowledge. No particular model of reflection is advocated but models which seek to deepen reflection by means of reference to authoritative sources are strongly encouraged. Typical WBIS assignments are therefore a reflective commentary on lived experience or perhaps the submission of workplace artefacts (such as reports, charts, notes of meetings and so on) alongside a reflective commentary. The specific requirements of the WBIS programme has created a distinct community of practice among tutors who created and deliver it (Leonard and Talbot 2009). It is from this community that the University of Chester's first Professional Doctoral (DProf) programme has been created.

The Chester Professional Doctorate: taking reflection further

The University of Chester validated its Professional Doctorate in the summer of 2009. The first cohort will be inducted in January 2010 so what follows is an indication of some of the thinking which is going into one aspect of it. Unlike WBIS where within certain constraints (such as a mandatory Research Methods and Project module for a bachelor degree) students are free to create their own learning pathway, the DProf is structured, with clear submission dates with the intention students will complete within four years. In outline structure it is comprised of 180 credits at Level 7 and 360 at Level 8. At Level 7 students engage in modules designed to prepare them for study at Doctoral level, where the emphasis is on the generation of original, practitioner research.

The first module students are required to complete is in many ways the most important because it introduces students to advanced study in a university setting. This module ('Personal and Professional Review'- 40 credits) is therefore intended to perform a similar function to the existing Self Review

module at other levels on the WBIS programme. Students will identify learning achievements, identify the knowledge they intend to generate for Doctoral study and identify potential opportunities for APL. In addition they will also be expected develop a reflective approach to their learning and study, as is the case with many other existing Professional Doctorates (Armsby 2008; Sambrook and Stewart 2008). Despite the plethora of literature on reflective learning methods and assessment (see Moon 2008 for a good summary) discussions about the application of the notion of 'levelness' and progression are less prevalent[1]

In this respect, as practitioners, WBIS tutors assess reflective learning at different levels without a clear view about how progression occurs in reflective learning. For the DProf we have decided it is essential to take a more critical approach to reflective learning. In part this is for purely practical reasons. First we anticipate many students will have completed a WBIS award and we therefore need to ensure there is progressive learning. Second, we also feel that at this level of study, a more critical approach is appropriate and the programme of learning is rigorous.

Beyond that there is one other reason which relates to our own practice. Within the community of WBIS tutors we like to think there is genuine reflexivity: we are interested in our practice but like all practitioners we construct narratives about our work and ourselves. One of the stories we tell ourselves is that reflective learning is a 'good thing' and that we are 'good' at it. But like all paradigms, there are puzzles within and we are all aware of this. There are some things we know and some things we think we know. We know for example, that not all students are especially good at reflective learning. For some it can become an exercise in solipsism; for others self justification or aggrandisement. For those lacking confidence it can become almost masochistic. However we believe that it works well for the majority and that they are able to add value to what they do as a result. We believe that largely because of the things the students tell us in their assignments but we do not really *know* it. It is convenient for us to think this but because of those Kuhnian puzzles- the awkward bits which do not fit the narrative, we are uneasy. So we want to develop a more critical approach to reflection and the DProf seems the best place to begin this. The starting point for a more critical approach is to engage with the thinking of those who are critical of reflective learning.

[1] There are some exceptions to this such as Kember et al (1999); Kember et al (2000); Warhurst (2008)

Critics of reflective learning

Many of the theorists of reflective learning make some rather grand claims for what it can achieve. Brookfield (1997) for example characterises reflection as challenging common sense understandings, deliberately assuming alternative means of explaining actions and even a recognition of dominant cultural values underpinning actions.

But it also has its critics. Carroll et al (2002) argue that unlike other approaches to learning such as Problem Based Learning, there is little consensus on what constitutes reflective learning, there is no agreed method for delivering and assessing it and little empirical evidence that it alters actions in the real world. One exception is the study reported by Gould and Baldwin (2004) where students did change as a result of reflective learning but not the organisations they worked in. For Harvey and Knight (1995) there is little to distinguish 'reflection' from 'thinking' and that the insights it may provide are likely to be more self affirming than transformative. Barnett (1997) argues reflective practice is a socially driven concept which may not stimulate real critical reflection. He also reports an interesting small survey of his own students undertaking reflective learning practices but who would appear to have little idea of what is meant by 'reflective learning'. He concludes that while 'necessary', it is 'on its own an insufficient form of reflection for high levels of critical thought, activity and self transformation' (p103). Focussing on the actions of the self does not enable students to fully understand the way in which the concepts they use to understand their own actions are in turn, socially constructed…'the students inner self is constructed more by external agendas…than by the students own personal aspirations, values and hold on the world' (p100). Other critics, such as Greenwood (1993); Hulah (1995); Pryce (2002) and Taylor (2003) make similar arguments: most reflection is naïve because those undertaking reflection simply do not have the means to identify the world as it is socially constructed. For Taylor (2003) the issue is not whether reflective learning is appropriate or not, it is the uncritical way in which it is advocated, as if personalised narrative accounts are themselves authentic and unproblematic.

Perhaps the most sophisticated critic is Mackintosh (1998). She highlights the contribution to theorists of reflective learning such as Dewey, Mezirow and Schon. She concludes that only is it unclear what each means by 'reflection' but that the intellectual rigour demanded may be beyond most people. At a practical level she concludes that favoured methods, such as reflective diaries and workshops do not generate the kind of deeper thought advocated by theorists. She then quotes studies which question the degree to which nurses are able to learn reflectively: Cavanagh at al (1995) for example found that of 192 in a sample, only 46% could be regarded as reflective learners. Finally she re-states the lack of evidence to support the view that reflective learning underpins improved performance.

Another line of attack, which Mackintosh alludes to in respect of the reliability of remembered events, is the reliance of reflective learning methods on self reported events and self evaluation. The role of memory and its unreliability has been commented on by others such as Newell (1992); Newell (1994);Jones (1995) – all

quoted in Taylor (2003). More recently Rigg and Trehan (2008) have noted how cognitive dissonance may inhibit true accounts of self reported actions.

Problems with reflective learning: a tutor's perspective

As tutor practitioners we are well aware that many of our students are not reflecting in the way many of its advocates claim they should be. It is not unusual to read a reflective account which informs the reader that the actions undertaken were the best that could be and in addition, they are further justified by reference to leading academic theory. Such accounts usually highlight the author's sterling qualities compared with the dismal failings of others. Alternatively but less frequently we read that reflection has revealed the depths of the students' incompetence, especially when compared with the nostrums of leading thinkers in the field. Perhaps more common than both is a descriptive account of what happened with precious little reflection of any description. We certainly recognise the criticism that the tools of critical reflection, those concepts students use to make sense of lived experience often represents socially constructed ideas over which they have little critical insight. We are also aware, from a rationalist perspective, of the invalidity of the self reflecting on the self. This is not the same as saying, as some critics do, that there is no value in reflective learning because we also see many examples of its power to induce genuine fresh thinking. But we think the DProf represents an opportunity to facilitate a deeper approach to reflective learning, where the nature of reflection is considered more critically.

Critical reflection in the Chester DProf

The starting point for our own critical reflections on the way in which we facilitate reflective learning is that we recognise the limitations of our current practice where students are seen in isolation from the world they inhabit and where the mind is regarded as separate from the body. In short we wish to place reflective learning in its social and psychological context and more importantly, enable students to see it too. Deeper critical and reflective learning demands we examine the linearity of reflective learning cycles reflexively.

The first aspect we want doctoral students to address is the socially constructed nature of their own knowledge of and understanding of the world. This perspective is derived from sociological 'social constructivism', which originates from the work of Berger and Luckman (1966) who hypothesise that as people and groups interact over a period of time they create shared meanings and understandings derived from the social roles they occupy. A simple example is the idea of a cash economy. The understanding that a coin represents a specific monetary value is created and reinforced by countless social interactions which confirm that shared understanding. The construction of a social reality, which we assume rather than reflect upon, reduces uncertainty and enables us to focus on more important issues. So the creation of an economy based upon an abstract but universally shared understanding saves us from the complexity and uncertainty of a barter economy. It

also enables us to shift our understanding of roles and meanings in accordance with changing needs and priorities. To take an example of a role, that of ‘university tutor’ has specific meanings based on social context at a particular point in time. Full participation in the role of say a Work Based Learning tutor is a gradual process they term ‘socialisation’. Those familiar with the idea of situated learning might think of the same process as moving from ‘peripheral’ to ‘legitimate’ participation but the point is that the defining and meaning of that role is a social artefact and that therefore, the thoughts and actions which within it are not the product of a disembodied intelligence but the result of a multitude of shared and constructed social understandings.

When we as tutors ask students in work to reflect upon their role and actions we are not doing so against a background of a nineteenth century industrial economy, we are doing so in the context of a globalised, de-industrialised, individualised, knowledge based economy in a programme of learning which is similarly post-industrial and individualised. The world view of students and tutors alike is that of inhabitants of that world, using ideas which belong to this time and culture. So the first task for those reflecting on our doctoral programme, who in Reich’s (1992) terms, are earning a living as ‘symbolic analysts’ is to be able to de-construct their own assumptions about their own identity, beliefs and understandings and see themselves as socially constructed beings. In this we can claim no particular originality. Field (2006) has convincingly demonstrated the links between the post industrial economy and the lifelong learning agenda while Fook and Gardner (2007) already encourage their students to de-construct their own world view as the basis for reflection.

The second aspect we wish to engage with is the students’ understanding of their own cognition and here we are drawing upon insights from cognitive psychology (in short the ‘science of thinking’) and in particular the way in which we filter experience through cognitive processing and the bias this creates in our perception of the world. Even if we regard disregard the extent to which we incorporate the views and understandings of others and regard ourselves as essential asocial, autonomous and authentic our view of the world is at best partial. Cognitive bias describes our tendency to make errors of judgement based on cognitive factors- in other words the mistakes we all make in our judgements about the world because of the way in which our brains work. Or as Levy (1997, p86) expresses it cognitive bias is the collective name for the ‘systematic mistakes that derive from limits that are inherent in our capacity to process information’. Their function appears to be as a kind of way of simplifying complex reality into something we can understand and communicate, possibly as an evolutionary adaptation.

At an intuitive level most of us are aware that our own recollections of events may not be completely accurate but to imagine this is not really significant (after all, courts of law rely on witness accounts) is to significantly under-estimate the degree of likely inaccuracy. For those unfamiliar with the idea of cognitive bias, the most striking feature is the sheer number of sources of bias and the weight and range of supporting empirical evidence. There is only space here to mention a few but there are a number of excellent texts on the subject (Ariely 2009; Fine 2007; Piattelli-Palmarini 1994; Pohl 2004; Sutherland 2007; Tavris and Aronson 2008)

Some of the biases which are likely to affect reflective accounts include the introspection bias, fundamental attribution error, hindsight bias. Introspection bias describes our propensity to believe that our own introspections are unbiased, unlike those of others, which we regard as more likely to be biased. This in turn is based upon our own view of ourselves as being 'better than average' in terms of our possession of desirable traits and fewer undesirable traits. Even when people are informed of this 'halo' effect, their views are beliefs and perceptions are not altered (Pronin and Kugler 2007). The Confirmation bias describes the tendency to find information, remember the past or interpret events in ways which supports pre-existing beliefs (Wason and Johnson Laird 1972)). *Hindsight bias* describes the way in which we regard past events as having an inevitability about them which was often not evident at the time. In layman's terms hindsight bias is 'wise after the event' – over emphasising our ability to foresee future events based on (inaccurate) reflections on the past (Jones 1995; Hoffrage and Pohl 2003). The *Fundamental attribution error* describes our tendency to use personality based explanations for the behaviour of others and under-estimate situational explanations. By contrast we tend to interpret our own actions in the light of the situations we find ourselves in rather than in terms of our own preferences and beliefs (Ross 1977). So our observation that someone is an alcoholic because of an 'addictive personality' whilst discounting their status as a victim of child abuse who has suffered relationship breakdown may reflect our own tendency to moralise rather than a reasoned view of behaviour based on 'common sense'.

Finally, I will mention one other example of cognitive bias, mostly because it is so well known and also likely to affect accounts reflective learners produce- cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). Cognitive dissonance is the feeling of discomfort we experience when we hold two or more contradictory ideas or cognitions simultaneously. The theory holds that to reduce this discomfort we will change, rationalise or modify those beliefs. For example it is possible some MPs may be dimly aware that as trusted public servants they should not claim excessive expenses. Yet they may be able to rationalise claims to have their moat cleaned out at public expense by assuming anyone else in their situation would do the same thing. So when the public express some disagreement with this assessment it might seem reasonable to claim they are 'only jealous'. A great deal of empirical evidence has been accumulated to support the theory in the fifty or so years since it was first outlined and it is entirely reasonable to expect to see examples of it in reflective accounts of experience.

De-constructing reflective cycles: reflexive reflection

To date our experience with reflective learning has been with the use of reflective cycles where the self is regarded as socially and psychologically autonomous, capable of being both the neutral investigator and object of study. For the doctoral programme the aim is to adopt a more reflexive approach, sensitising learners (it is hoped) to see the self from inside and out by using insights derived from sociology and psychology, such as social constructionism, social constructivism and cognitive bias. The purpose is to question the neat circularity of the various reflective models and the idea of progressive learning- that we can really learn from experience in the

way such models suggest. This de-construction of a progressive, linear model of the world aims to arrive at truth by questioning a narrative. To understand why is not because we are simply attracted to a progressive line of thought. It is because we are concerned with reflection to ensure that as far as possible the reflective learning of our students reflects the truth as far as is possible. In order to do this we have to confront the power linear narratives have to attract and subsequently mislead us.

To understand the seduction we only have to contrast the events in our own lives with the narratives we routinely see in fiction. In the latter, constructed narratives virtue is routinely rewarded, love found, cause follows effect, tension resolved. By contrast our own lives are considerably messier: bad people often do very well, not everyone finds true love and there appears to be a large degree of randomness to the world. There are no endings in real life, save death and many would contest that. Despite knowing constructed narratives are not 'true' we find they have a powerful grip on our imagination, as circular/ linear/ progressive models of reflective learning do. They may not accurately describe the world as we really experience it- they are instead a powerful fictionalised narrative. We wish to develop a more reflexive approach, based upon a deeper understanding of the way in which we understand the world to form the basis for a re-constructed account of lived experience. De-constructing this type of narrative as the basis for re-construction represents a post-modern approach to reflective learning and in this enterprise we are not alone: Fook and Gardner (2007) appear to be doing something similar.

Re-constructing reflection

The basis for our evolving approach to critical reflection is one which accepts the idea of human understanding and therefore critical reflection as *bounded rationality* (Simon 1957). That is we accept that reflective thinking can and often is rational but that rationality is circumscribed. The thoughts we regard as our own are in fact social constructs created in a particular social context which not only limit our ability to make sense of the world but also define it. Further, even within that constraint, our ability to perceive lived experience as it actually occurs is hampered by the limitations of our own cognitive processes. A truly reflective approach to learning from experience should, if only at advanced levels, recognise these constraints.

Moreover there are means by which we can assist learners to see beyond the shackles of the pre-constructed world and limited cognition- by means of explicit emphasis on critical thinking- ‘that mode of thinking- about any subject, context or problem- in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them” (Paul, Fisher and Nosich 1992, p4). That is thinking about thinking – also sometimes known as metacognition. There is no shortage of texts including Fisher (2001) and Moon (2008a) both of which provide a broad introduction. Others such as Alfaro- Le Fevre (1999); Cottrell (2005) and Jones-Devitt and Smith (2007) are more practically oriented.

Summary and conclusion

The Professional Doctorate programme at the University of Chester incorporates reflective learning which aims to go beyond existing approaches which emphasise the use of linear/ circular models. The aim is to sensitise learners both to the socially constructed nature of their world view and the limitations of their own cognition. By these means it is hoped experience can be re-interpreted using the tools of critical thinking.

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